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A PILGRIM'S CONFESSION

By RUTH EWING HANSON



WHEELBARROWS ON A COUNTRY ROAD IN CHINA

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NINE women of the Han village were seated together in the shade of a pomegranate tree in front of Mrs. Chang's home. Mrs. Chang had greeted them all cordially and had served cups of boiling hot water before opening the conversation. Then she seated herself on the doorstep saying:

"You know we have been talking for some time of going to the sacred Tai Mountain this spring. I think it is time to make definite plans. There are yet several months before the time for women to visit the mountain and if each of us will put two *tiao* into our treasury every month, at the end of that time we shall have enough for the journey. We shall need three wheelbarrows, although one room will accommodate us at the inn, and we can carry our own food. I have been longing to go for many years; the crops are good, and I feel that if I am ever going I must go this year."

"I am glad that you have come to that conclusion," said Mrs. Wu. "My old board (husband) has just told me again that I must go to Tai Mountain to beg the old lady goddess for a baby boy for our son and his wife. They have two daughters now, which fact makes us all very much ashamed. I have been

embroidering a lovely pair of dainty slippers to give to the goddess, and I shall be very glad to have good company on the long journey."

"Such sights as we shall see!" exclaimed young Mrs. Chao. "I hear there is a post office and a telegraph office in that ancient City of Great Peace, Taianfu, and that people there send letters through the air. There are many fine old temples, too, and some say there are a number of foreign devils (missionaries) living there. They have yellow hair and blue eyes and noses like mountains; the women boss the men about so that the men always do just as their wives tell them to; the men must take off their hats and bow their heads to the ground every time they speak to a woman. I hope we shall see some of them, although it must be a horrible sight. They do say, too, that these same foreign devils snatch the eyes out of our children to mix in their medicines and —"

"Now, Mrs. Chao, I would not talk any more about that," interrupted Mrs. Han. "You only show your ignorance and make people laugh at you. Did I not visit Tai Mountain five years ago? Did I not see those people from the Beautiful Country (America)? They are very queer in appearance, wear very strange clothes, but my sister's mother-in-law's aunt told me that they are good people and are teaching the children of that city in schools. Her granddaughter had learned to read several books, though she was not yet fourteen years old. They think it will be very valuable in getting her a rich husband. They told me besides many strange things about the teachings of these Americans; I want to hear it again. I cannot repeat it to you, because I am old and do not remember very well, but I know it was good."

"We are in hard luck this year," said young Mrs. Han, the widowed daughter-in-law of the old lady, "but I am determined to go with mother, and we promise to give our share of the money."

After further discussion, the plans were completed and each woman dropped her *tiao* into a gourd that was then entrusted to Mrs. Han. She was to be the leader of the party, because she

was the oldest and had been to the mountain before. Every month after this until the last *tiao* had been collected, they met to talk over their plans and to place their money in the gourd.

The night before the party was to start, Mrs. Han was being helped to bed by her daughter-in-law, whose eyes were red with weeping and who stumbled as she helped the old lady to her brick bed. "O Mother!" she said, "I am so miserable. My heart is like a great stone most of the time and then a terror seizes me and it jumps like a wolf. My husband is dead and you are growing old; my sons are wild and unfilial; I have not seen them for two years and have heard of them only when their creditors come to get money from me. We are growing poorer every day with the prospect of very little to wear and less to eat. My daughter is threatening to commit suicide because of her cruel mother-in-law. I have no peace in my soul. I have vowed that I will climb Tai Mountain on my knees, from the bottom to the top, even past the Old Lady Goddess, on up to the sacred stones that fell from Heaven to mark the highest peak. There I shall call upon Heaven to send some ray of hope to my soul." A look of longing came into her eyes that told how much she was suffering and how much she hoped to gain by the visit.

"Ah, it will be a wearisome journey for you," replied the older woman, "but I know your distress and were I younger I would join you. I well remember how my father used to be troubled and unable to sleep at nights. We often saw him go out under the open sky and stretch his arms towards Heaven; sometimes his lips would open as if he were about to speak and then his arms would drop and he would rush into the house and throw himself on the bed, crying like a child. Perhaps if he had climbed Tai Mountain, Heaven might have helped him to say what was on his lips and what seemed to hurt him so much, because he could not utter it."

"Our honorable grandfather was a remarkable man. There are very few who dare call on Heaven. There are many women about us who suffer as much as we and few of them go even to the village shrine. Our traveling companions care more for the

strange sights and the excitement of the journey than for the visit to the goddess."

"That is because they have no hope of help. I am sure there is a heart hunger in all of them that is never satisfied, and moments of tragic despair come into every life." Old Mrs. Han covered her face with the blankets and turned to the wall, while her daughter stole quietly away to attend to a few remaining duties in connection with the journey.

The next morning the whole party was astir early and, just as the first rays of the morning sun touched the towers of the village gates, six wheelbarrows filed over the bridge of the moat out to the country road, each barrow squeaking and squealing a cheery accompaniment to the labored steps of the men who were pushing them. The noise of the barrows making conversation next to impossible, the women settled themselves into their blankets and wraps for a delayed morning nap. The heavy clouds of



PASSENGER BARROWS THAT TRAVEL THIRTY MILES A DAY

dust that rose from the road caused them no special discomfort and they nodded contentedly for several hours until the wheelbarrow men began to shout to one another that it was time for breakfast. As they were passing through a village at the time, they drew up to an open-air restaurant and the women dismounted; bowls of hot gruel were ordered and dry bread was taken from their bundles of lunch. The wheelbarrow men quickly finished their breakfast, lighted their pipes and smoked a half-thimbleful of tobacco; then, knocking the ashes from the bowls, they announced that they were ready to start.

Now, while Mrs. Han and her friends are slowly moving on their way, let us hurry forward and before they arrive learn what we can of this Tai Mountain. Tai Shan, or Great Mountain, is one of the oldest sacred mountains in the world. When Moses was receiving the law on Mt. Sinai, pilgrims were making their way to the top of this mountain to worship the one true God, and during the centuries since, it has been held sacred.

Hundreds of years ago a great stone road was built from the bottom to the top. It is about twenty feet wide and in the main follows one of the mountain streams, but makes its final ascent through a deep gorge. This great road is lined with handsome old arbor vitæ trees, which are almost the only trees on the mountain; for Tai Shan, like all North China, has been shorn of its forests, and in consequence has lost most of its soil. Peak upon peak of solid rock rises on either side of the great road; many temples, teahouses, beggar huts and ancient tablets are located along the way. Confucius himself visited this mountain, and references to it are found in the oldest classical books.

At present the Taoists have charge of most of the temples and the principal object of worship is the "Old Lady of the Mountain," who has large temples almost at the top. She is represented by a large gilded figure of a sweet-faced woman with two equally large but less resplendent attendants on either side of her. Many of the pilgrims never go beyond her temple, every year thousands visit Tai Shan during the spring months.

At the end of the second day's journey, the weary party drew into the west suburb of the City of Great Peace and the six



THE WEARISOME FLIGHTS OF STEPS UP MT. TAI

women found themselves at the gate of an inn. To the north of them, rising 5,000 feet straight from the plain, towered the great sacred mountain in all its rocky beauty and barren grandeur.

Early the next morning they began the ascent of the mountain. Passing out of the north gate of the city, they were surrounded by innumerable pilgrims, all making their way in the

same direction. There were men and women from all classes and stations in life; some were being carried in chairs, others were assisted by servants, while by far the larger number were walking up the wearisome flights of steps. No one hurried, no one pushed or crowded, while at every landing there were groups seated on the low wall, resting and enjoying the scenery. Hundreds of beggars lined the way, and the united sound of their monotonous cries for alms could be heard a mile away. From every crossroad and by-way, a new stream of pilgrims was added to the great mass that was making its tortuous way up the valley until, viewed at a distance, the road seemed like some living, writhing creature slowly winding its way forever upward.

Our six friends kept close together. Mrs. Han led the way leaning on the arm of Mrs. Wu. All of the women had long pilgrim staves — all but the younger Mrs. Han who, as soon as she reached the first flight of steps, dropped to her knees. She did not hinder the party greatly, for all the women had bound feet and were able to proceed only very slowly. At the base of the mountain they passed through the First Gate of Heaven, then the Red Gate; by ten o'clock they had reached the Nunnery. At twelve they came to "The Place Where the Horse Turned Back"; by one o'clock they reached the Middle Gate of Heaven, and soon after passed the Spreading Pines.

From here the road is very steep, the rocky gorge narrows, the trees can no longer find a foothold for their roots, the voices of the multitude seem hushed, yet the echoes multiply an hundredfold. The steps grow narrower and steeper until the weary pilgrims find their heads dizzy with the altitude; their ears ring and their hearts pound. They are panting for breath, but ever slowly, patiently, they move upward. One more long flight of steps, and they stagger through the Heavenly Gate. The climb is over.

Here our party wished to rest and drink tea, but the declining sun warned them to hurry on. Entering the temple of the Old Lady Goddess, they opened their bundles and took out incense and paper money. They prostrated themselves and threw cash in front of the shrine. Mrs. Wu begged the goddess to send



IDOL WORSHIPPED ESPECIALLY BY WOMEN WANTING CHILDREN

a baby boy to her son's home and threw her embroidered slippers through the bars to the feet of the goddess.

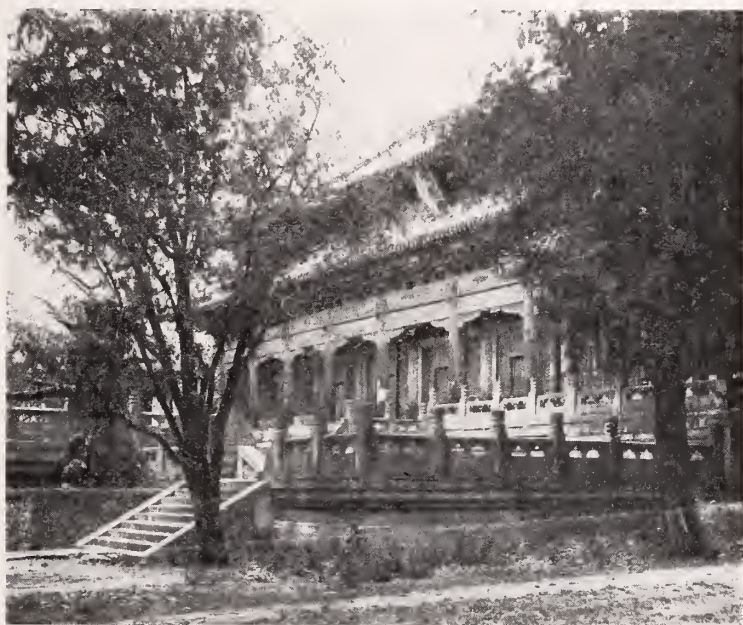
As soon as these ceremonies were finished, the women were ready for rest and they began to bargain for a sleeping place in a near-by room. Only Mrs. Han had not yet finished her pilgrimage; she climbed up more flights of steps, above all the other temples, to the highest point. At last she passed under the archway and knelt in the open court in front of the stones that fell from Heaven. Too exhausted to formulate her prayer, had she had words to express it, she folded her hands and bowed her head to the ground. So long did she remain in this attitude that the priest became alarmed and tried to raise her.

"If you are very weary, will you not rest on this bench? I will order a cup of hot tea," he said. Slowly she raised herself and throwing a few cash to a beggar child in the temple court, she seated herself and accepted the tea.

"Do you wish to remain here for the night?" the priest asked.

"I wish never to move again," she replied. "I am very tired, but I have friends at the temple below and I must hurry back to them. It is late and the wind is cold here." So she turned to go back. Having accomplished her weary pilgrimage, a certain sense of satisfaction that it had been properly done seemed the forerunner of the peace she had hoped would soon come to her soul.

She found the place where the other women were preparing for the night; some had already spread their blankets on the rude benches and were half asleep; others were bathing their pitiful feet in hot water. One was encouraging a charcoal fire and another was ordering bowls of noodle soup. Young Mrs. Han dropped to the nearest stool and thankfully accepted the hot food handed her. Half an hour later the lights were out and all were sleeping as best they could on the hard beds.



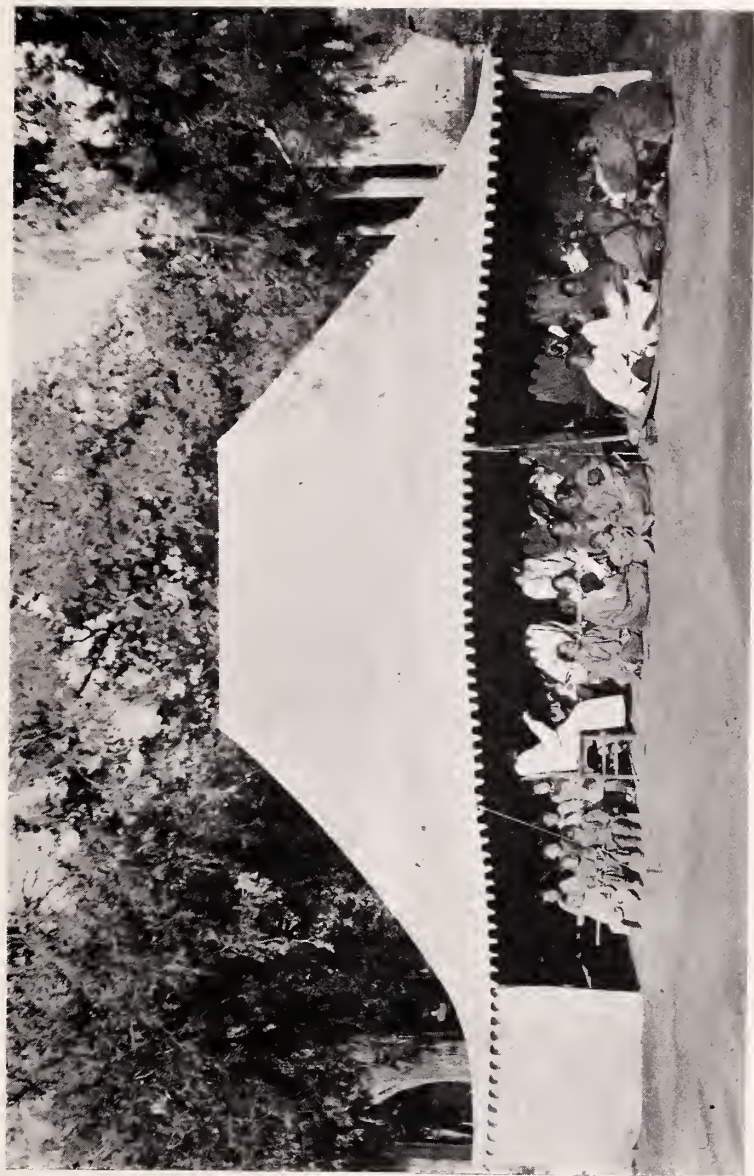
GREAT TEMPLE AT TAIANFU

I need not weary my reader with a detailed account of the toilsome descent on the next day. In some respects it was more difficult for the bound-footed women than the ascent. How giddy one becomes always looking down, down, down! How the knees give way from under one, and how the limbs tremble! Oh, the burning and the aching of the feet! Finally, in despair, Mrs. Chang sat down and began sliding from step to step, like a little child making its first efforts to go down stairs; and indeed at times all the others followed her example. Would you, O blest Christian woman, have laughed or cried had you seen them bumping along in this ridiculous fashion?

The next day these women made visits to the temples in the city, including the Buddhist Hell, the quiet and dignified Confucian Temple, and, lastly, the Tai Miao which, during the pilgrim season, resembles a county fair, with the exhibits left out. The court is filled with venders of all sorts of wares. The souvenir toys are most in evidence, and every pilgrim is expected to take something home to the children. Will it be a plaster doll or a wooden sword; a set of clay marbles or a jointed bamboo dragon with a whistle in its tail? There are booths for selling cloth, hair-strings, towels and ornaments. There are potted plants and flowers. There is the peanut man and the peep show, Punch and Judy, the fortune teller and the medicine man.

Mrs. Han and her party enjoyed it greatly. Young Mrs. Chao rejoiced that she was getting her eyes opened, and spoke of the fun it would be to tell the neighbors at home. Presently they discovered a white tent from which women came and went at their own pleasure. Mrs. Chao went up to see what might be inside. She was somewhat disappointed to find only benches within and groups of women sitting about drinking tea. An old lady was standing at the door leaning on her thorn stick; her kind face reassured Mrs. Chao, but before she had time to speak the old lady said:

"You have been to the top of the mountain, I suppose, and have burned incense not a little. Now you are seeing the 'hot time' we are having here. I am Mother Wang; if you are tired just step in and rest a while." The woman hesitated, fearing



THEY DISCOVERED A WHITE TENT FROM WHICH WOMEN CAME AND WENT

there was something to pay for this unusual courtesy. Just then Mrs. Han, coming up from the rear and looking for the first time into the tent, discovered a face she recognized and hurriedly pushed her way past the others. Mrs. Chao was too astonished to move when she saw Mrs. Han making a deep courtesy to what she became convinced must be one of those foreign devils that she had heard about. But Mrs. Han was talking now.

"Oh, honorable old lady, you do not remember me but I remember you. You spoke to a group of pilgrim women on the temple steps five years ago; you told us wonderful things that were good to hear. I cannot remember all of what you said, for I am old and never heard such things before, but won't you please tell me again before I die? I want my companions to hear, also. Won't you tell us now?"

The foreign lady was somewhat surprised by this sudden and earnest appeal, but her heart was full of the sweetest story ever told. Although she had not the slightest recollection of this woman's face, yet she knew there was only one story that she had ever told on temple steps and she knew she had told that story to thousands of women. Her heart bounded with joy that this woman had treasured her words. She quickly seated the women and began to talk with Mrs. Han, while the others leaned forward to listen.

Mrs. Chao did not pay much attention to what was being said. She was greatly absorbed in staring at the missionary. "What does she eat," wondered Mrs. Chao, "to make her skin so white and her nose so large?" But the young Mrs. Han had hidden her face in her hands to shut out the distracting sights, while her soul drank deep of the Water of Life as she heard for the first time of the Heavenly Father's love and tender care for his Chinese children. Oh, if she could only comprehend it all — forgiveness from sin, a Saviour who had lived on earth, a heavenly home after death!

The missionary talked with them for two hours. Some of the women left the tent for gayer sights and sounds, but Mrs. Han sat still while her daughter-in-law never raised her head, for the hot tears were streaming from her eyes. Finally, Mrs.

Wu came in and urged that it was time to go to the inn. Then Mrs. Han realized that she had kept her teacher long past the usual meal-time. She made due apologies, but could not forbear to take the missionary's hand in both of hers and say:

"Oh, it is all very good, very good, but I am too old, and I do not understand very clearly. I cannot change the habits of a lifetime. How I wish I might have heard this when I was a young woman like my daughter-in-law and these other women."

Then young Mrs. Han raised her head and a great light shone on her face. "I understand," she said, "and I believe it is all true. My great fear is that I may forget some of what you have said when I am at home again with no one to help me. But you have been very kind and I thank you. We must allow you to go to your food."

Thus they walked out of the tent, but with their heart hunger only half satisfied. The missionary quickly selected a Gospel of Mark from a pile of books and, running after the women, thrust it into Mrs. Han's hands, saying: "Read this, or ask some teacher in your village to read it to you. This is the story I have been telling you." The woman accepted the book with joyful thanks and passed on into the crowd.

* * * *

This is all that I can tell you of Mrs. Han and her daughter. None of us ever saw them again. Once I passed in sight of their village and longed to make them a call, but circumstances forbade. My heart has always been at rest about young Mrs. Han, however, for none of us who saw the look in her eyes as she made her great confession — "I understand and I believe it is all true" — can ever doubt that she had caught a spark of the true faith that is acceptable to God. Nor dare we doubt that the Spirit of Truth, who has promised to bring all things to her remembrance, will fail to conquer her fear that "I may forget when at home again with no one to help me."

Is God expecting to use *your* gift to supply her need?

